

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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The Rise of a Counter-Academy?

A Survey of Recent Articles

Last winter, Yale University graduate students seeking recognition as a union refused to issue the grades of undergraduates in courses they had taught. This “grade strike” outraged the professors. “What faculty [member] in his right mind wants a TA [teaching assistant] who’s not going to do the grading?” Peter Brooks, chairman of the comparative literature department at Yale University, tells Emily Eakin, a staff member of the *New Yorker* writing in *Lingua Franca* (Mar.–Apr. 1996).

The Yale grade strikers were unsuccessful, but their dramatic action points up the fact that, in the humanities, job prospects for students who acquire Ph.D.’s are bleak. Yale’s English department, for instance, last year was able to place only two out of 15 students in tenure-track positions. This dismal employment situation nationwide may ultimately produce sweeping change in the heavily politicized field of literary study. The prospect worries many academics. “The job crisis and the oversupply of Ph.D.’s color everything we do,” Cary Nelson, a professor in the English department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, writes in *Academe* (Nov.–Dec. 1995). “Indeed, the market will almost certainly lead many campuses to reintroduce all the injustices [the American Association of University Professors] has fought against for decades.” Endangered, he asserts, are the tenure system and free speech.

Despite the drop in demand for humanities Ph.D.’s, the universities (with some exceptions) apparently have not cut

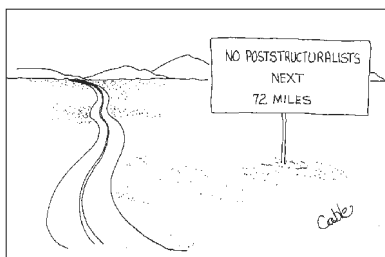
back production. The number of humanities doctorates awarded annually has increased by more than 20 percent since the job market turned down in 1989, reports George Judson in the *New York Times* (Jan. 17, 1996).

The reason for the continued production is obvious, according to Nelson. “Without a viable job market, Ph.D. programs have only one economic rationale—they are a source of cheap instructional labor for universities.” In his own department, he says, graduate students teach two-thirds of the courses. Nelson himself has in the past taught composition “and enjoyed it, [but] I would now find it demoralizing and intolerable to have to grade hundreds of composition papers each semester. There is no way I could do it as carefully and thoroughly as my graduate students do.”

Although he favors closing “some poor quality and underutilized degree programs,” Nelson basically wants to keep the surplus labor pool of graduate students—but treat them as employees being “culturally enriched” rather than as apprentices. He urges graduate students to unionize. They “have much to gain and little to lose but their illusions, their false consciousness, and the myths of professionalism that makes them complicit in their own exploitation.

Unionize. . . . You have nothing to lose but your chains.”

The academy, Nelson says, needs to do a much better job of enlightening the public about “our achievements” in recent decades: “The 20-year



effort to open the canon and recover a fuller sense of our literary heritage should be widely viewed as a triumph of democracy. Yet it has been successfully demonized and represented as a loss of standards and value."

But even Nelson's fellow humanities professors are far from united in seeing the recent developments as a triumph. Writing in *Commonweal* (Apr. 5, 1996), Frank McConnell, an English professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, angrily charges that "the barbarians" have taken over the English departments in most of America's major universities: "We've produced a generation of teachers who cannot read, can barely write, and do not teach." Until recently, academics have been able to brush off arguments that trends such as deconstruction, multiculturalism, and new historicism are "silly, self-serving, anti-educational cults of specialists" because they were often voiced by "mere" journalists. But dissension is increasingly being voiced within the ranks. "When Harold Bloom, surely our most eminent and humane critic, said the same thing . . . the stuck-pig squeals of outrage from the tenured" were loud indeed, McConnell notes.

Sander L. Gilman, a University of Chicago professor and president last year of the 32,000-member Modern Language Association (MLA), is appalled by such assaults "on our profession by our own colleagues," he declares in the association's journal, *PMLA* (May 1996). "These relentless attacks on the humanities in general and on the MLA in particular," he says, "have given comfort to those who desire to downsize and eventually bury our entire system of higher education."

Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball, editor and managing editor, respectively, of the *New Criterion* (Feb. 1995), do not believe civilization would be diminished by the elimination of much of the intellectual fare at MLA conventions. At the 1994 meeting, they write, literature was "the principal casualty. At almost every turn we encountered an open and agreed-upon hostility to it, and on the rare programs where it was discussed as anything but a disguised form of malign political repression or a 'text' for some variety of 'transgressive' sexuality, it was either derided, condescended to, or openly attacked." The MLA, they concluded, "has fully suc-

ceeded in rendering itself irrelevant to the real world of literary and humanistic study." Yet the conventions roll on, featuring offerings such as "Self-Reflectivity, Narrative Strategies, and the Soap Opera as Postmodern Genre," listed in *PMLA* (Nov. 1995).

"In the early 1970s," Ricardo J. Quinones, a professor of English and comparative literature at Claremont-McKenna College, comments in *Academic Questions* (Winter 1994-95), "we were at a critical turn: the old New Criticism had long been dead. . . . There was a fork in the road and we, American academic criticism and American academic learning, took the wrong turn, making ourselves and our organization the laughingstock of the generally sensible and literate public."

Such critics took heart from the formation in late 1994 of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics (ALSC)—whose 1,800 members now include such eminent names as Robert Alter, Denis Donoghue, Donald Hall, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., John Hollander, Christopher Ricks, Richard Poirier, and Roger Shattuck. *Philosophy and Literature* (Apr. 1996) presents the fruits of the ALSC's first convention, held in Minneapolis last year.

One of the essays—"The Uncanonical Dante: *The Divine Comedy* and Islamic Philosophy," by Paul A. Cantor of the University of Virginia—is representative. Cantor attacks the simple-minded view that the Western canon "is Eurocentric, that it remains confined within a narrow orbit of European ideas and beliefs, thus excluding all other views of the world." In the canonical *Divine Comedy*, for example, Dante's portrayal of Limbo was influenced by the medieval Islamic philosopher Averroës. Appropriately, Dante placed him in Limbo, "with the ancient philosophers Dante greatly admired, thus giving an honored position to perhaps the most feared and hated thinker in the Christian Middle Ages." It would have been more theologically correct to have put Averroës with the heretics in the *Inferno*. Dante was widely suspected in his day—perhaps with good reason—of harboring heretical thoughts. The Western canon, Cantor concludes, is not so Eurocentric as critics suppose, nor so orthodox as some defenders of it imagine.